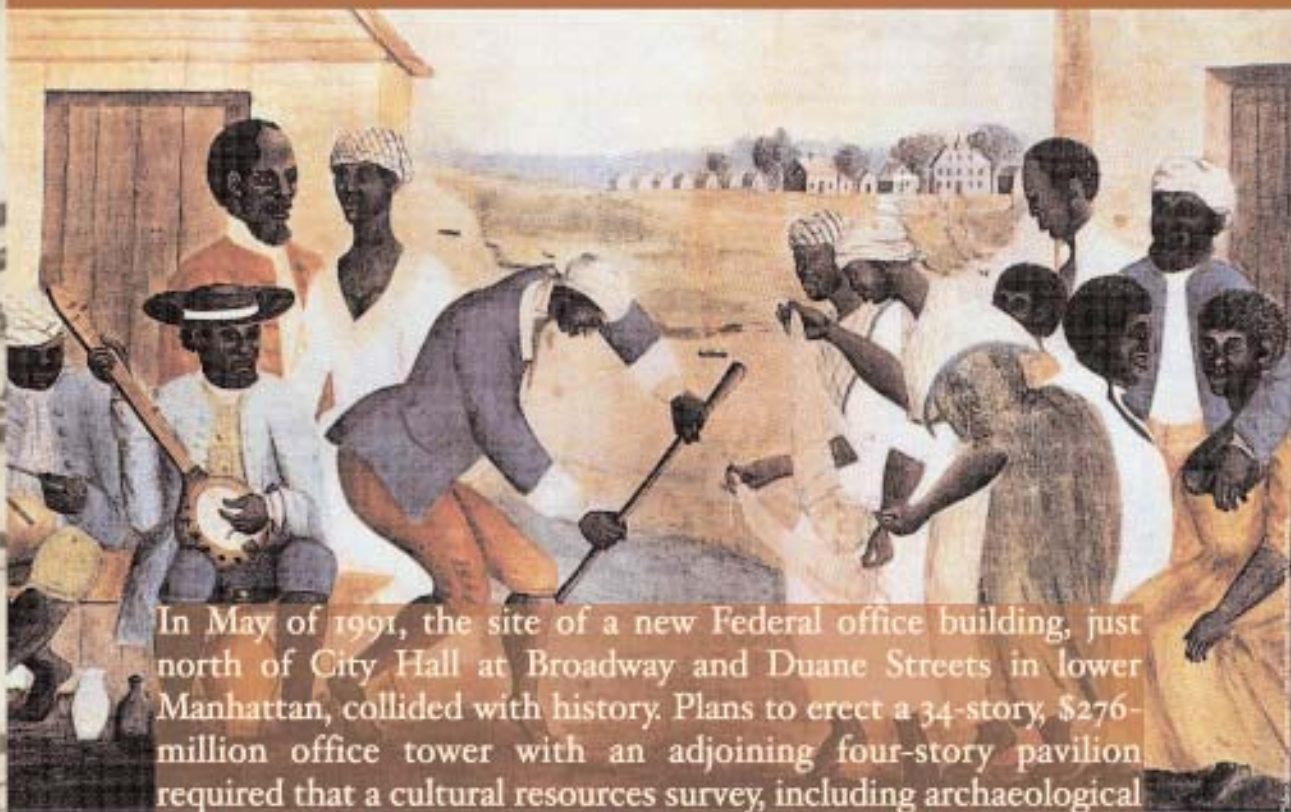# THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND
Return to the Past to Build the Future

In May of 1991, the site of a new Federal office building, just north of City Hall at Broadway and Duane Streets in lower Manhattan, collided with history. Plans to erect a 34-story, $276-million office tower with an adjoining four-story pavilion required that a cultural resources survey, including archaeological field-testing, be completed. Since 1966, federal law has mandated such research on any construction using public funds. The excavation unearthed a missing chapter of New York's history, as the first of more than 400 skeletal remains of men, women and children were discovered.

Unlike laws enacted in 1990 protecting Native American burial grounds, none existed to protect the burial grounds of Africans from desecration. The African American community responded with immediate action and was joined by private individuals and public figures, including leaders in New York City government and Congress. For African Americans, the remains found at the African Burial Ground represented a tangible connection to an unknown past.

RIGHTING THE PAST

The African Burial Ground is widely acknowledged as one of America's most significant archaeological finds of the 20th century. It is destined to redefine the history of one of the world's greatest cities, change the way African Americans are viewed, and perhaps most importantly, how they view themselves.

The African presence in Colonial New York is well documented but rarely taught and seldom discussed. Even less has been publicized about the contributions made by captive African laborers and half-free and freed farmers. Their labor greatly enabled the building and prosperity of New York City. The discovery of the African Burial Ground and the multidisciplinary study of the remains prove conclusively that the second wave of arrivals to New York were captured Africans. New York's history will now have to be rewritten to reflect that these men, women and children are as much a part of it as Europeans who came of their own free will.

NEGROS 'BURIEL' GROUND

Toward the end of the 17th century, the African Burial Ground came to be used by New York's African population due to a kind of "mortuary apartheid." Africans were forbidden to bury their dead in officially consecrated graveyards such as nearby Trinity Church. Called the "Negros Buriel {sic} Ground" on maps from the period, it was a desolate five-and-a-half-acre plot north of Wall Street. By 1794, an estimated 20,000 people were buried there, stacked layer upon layer. No marker memorialized the final resting-place of the city's first Africans, and the site was paved over and forgotten as New York grew and construction of new buildings and streets increased.

DISCOVERY AND ANALYSIS

Discovery of the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan sparked a controversy over the proper handling of a heritage. That this heritage belonged to a traditionally undervalued people increased the likelihood that the remains found at the African Burial Ground would not be given due reverence. It was questioned whether archaeologists and anthropologists without expertise in African culture would fully grasp the historical and cultural significance of the find and be equipped to interpret the burials.

A proposal by the Cobb Laboratory of Howard University, a research-oriented historically Black private university in Washington, D.C., offered a research plan to implement one of the few large-scale, carefully conceived academic research endeavors focused on African Americans. This archaeological, bio-anthropological and historical study would document the conditions, customs, characteristics and quality of life of New York's 17th and 18th centur enslaved Africans.

UNEARTHING HISTORY

Skeletal remains provide access to information that is otherwise unavailable. Bones can be analyzed for health and nutritional status, diet, gender and age at death. In addition to these factors, the Howard University team included – as a research focus – the social history and cultural adjustment of the Africans to the North American disease environment. With more than 400 burials, researchers had a large enough sample size to account for human variation, making accurate statistical analysis possible.

Based on distinctive skeletal characteristics, researchers determined that nine percent of the burials were children under the age of two, while another 32 percent were below the age of puberty. This indicates that the death rate among African children in Colonial New York was disproportionately high. Further study showed developmental defects in the dental enamel of the children's remains and delayed bone development, all indicators of malnutrition and prolonged or recurrent bouts of illness.

A MORE ACCURATE RECORD

Adult remains also exhibited poor nutrition and other characteristics indicative of the rigors of slavery. Of the 59 percent of the burials that were adults, nearly two-thirds were male. Not surprisingly, the life expectancy of these captive Africans was short. Death rates of men and women, ages 15 to 25, were unusually high, relative to those of the English Colonial population. Arm, leg and shoulder bones in a significant number of adult skeletal remains showed lesions called *enthesopathies* where muscles were torn away, further proof that the Africans were routinely worked beyond the limits of human capacity.

Results of the inter-disciplinary research effort yielded information of unprecedented import to the African American community, the field of archaeology overall, and the establishment of a more accurate historical record of Colonial America.
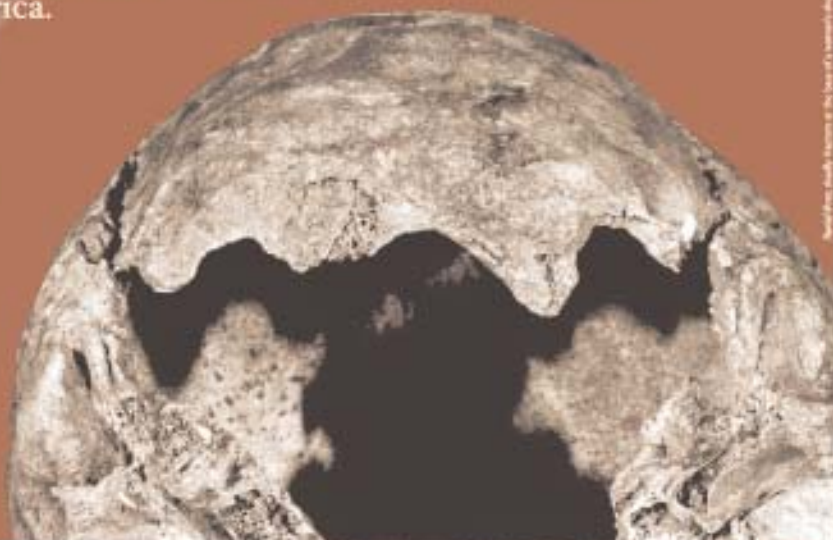
LINKS TO THE PAST

Most Africans in New York City lived in poverty, had little and took little with them to the grave. But, what they did take serves as a cultural bridge between their lives in the New World and those they were forced to leave behind. Among the hundreds of artifacts recovered was a complex, heart-shaped design made from 93 nails on a coffin lid. Identified by an African art historian as an Ashanti symbol called the "Sankofa" and meaning "Return to the Past to Build the Future," it is one of several direct links among the artifacts to cultures found in Ghana and the Ivory Coast.

Equally meaningful is the identification of ten different filing patterns on front teeth, a rite of passage among adolescent children in many parts of West and Central Africa. One poignant cultural reference to home is a string of glass beads found with the remains of a young woman. Originally thought to be fragments of bracelets, further study revealed that the beads had been worn at her waist. The blue, green and white glass beads, believed to represent water, were meant to help her on the trip to the afterlife, back over the water to Africa and her people.

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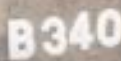
WHO THEY WERE

Nearly 300 years of silence was shattered with the discovery of the African Burial Ground. The fractured vertebrae and skeletal lesions

observed in the remains of men, women and children provide sobering evidence of the backbreaking labor that built and sustained one of America's largest city.

The Africans brought to New York by the Dutch in the early 17th and 18th centuries came from many different regions, cultures and religions. Like those who lived on the European continent, they spoke different languages and had divergent worldviews.

However, the reverence for ancestors and continuity of family were cultural elements that tended to be universal. And yet, this critical aspect of their humanity and identity was wrenched from them in the name of greater profit.

Of the more than 12 million men, women and children who made that agonizing voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, an estimated two-and-a-half-million are buried in its depths. Those who survived to arrive in New York were sold at auction. Slave traders separated husbands, wives and children, confining them in separate holding pens, destroying forever their links to home, name and blood.

Illustration of a New York slave market

BLACK NEW YORK

Once African American history began to taught in American schools in the late 1960s, Harlem became synonymous with Black New York. Generally, references to slavery in America only mentioned Southern states, with the economics-driven Civil War and resulting Emancipation Proclamation presented as slaverys climax. Unlike slavery in the South, New Yorkers from all walks life, including artists, merchants, clergy, mariners and gentlemen, owned enslaved Africans.

Dutch Colonists viewed the Africans in Lower Manhattan as human shields protecting them from dispaced Native Americans. As a result, the colonists granted half-free status and marginal plots of land to the Africans while still forcing them into hard labor. The Africans farmed what was then marshland (now Greenwich Village), and conseguently became the suppliers of a large quantity of the colony's produce.

UNSHAKEABLE SPIRIT

A growing number of free Africans made up the diverse population of 18th century New York. By 1746, the census recorded 2,444 people, or one out of five, as Black. Some were the descendants of people who had been freed by the Dutch during their tenure in what was then New Amsterdam. However, under the British rule that followed, many of the rights and privileges such as legal marriage and land ownership that had been accorded to both enslaved and free Africans were rescinded. Africans became subject to a highly restrictive legal system that resulted in severe physical and social coercion.
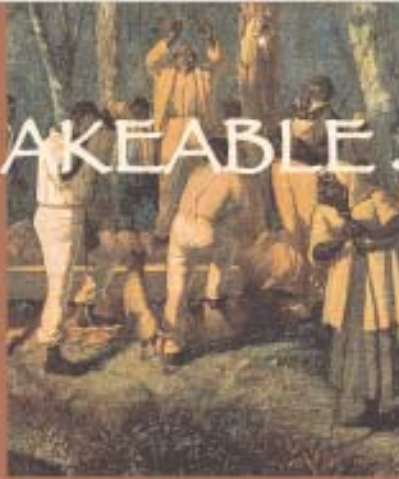
Despite such violent measures against them, captive and free Africans seized every social and economic opportunity available to build a distinct and culturally rich community. Fear of an African revolt against captivity led the colonists to enact laws that forbade the gathering of more than three slaves at any one time. Undeterred, the Africans held celebrations at night in secret. Since death amounted to the only freedom most could ever hope for, funerals took on some of the characteristics of a celebration.

CUSTOMS OF CONTINUITY

Denied access to the officially consecrated graveyards by the city's racially segregated burial policies, the Africans buried their dead in the African Burial Ground and their burial customs reflected memories of home. One such ritual involved passing an infant over the grave of the deceased to symbolize the continuation of life. Most were buried with heads pointing west – some believe to ensure that when they sat up in Judgment, they would be facing Jerusalem. Perhaps it was simply because their last thoughts were of Africa.

#39

Disfiguring lesions on the skeletal remains of those as young as six years of age indicate that even undernourished children were worked beyond the margins of physical capacity. A nameless boy, known only as "#39" from the label of the box containing his skeletal remains, provides the evidence. Born in New York during the 1700s, #39 died at the age of six. Examination of his remains show that he was lovingly laid to rest in a cedar coffin wrapped in now decayed white linen. A copper shroud pin has left a green oxidation mark on his skull. Malnourished and anemic from birth (undoubtedly due to his mother's poor state of health while pregnant) he suffered in his short life from a series of infections. Unusually heavy lifting caused over-development in the anchor points of his muscles.

HONORING OUR ANCESTORS

Preparing the Remains for Their Final Rest

Care and dignity were paramount in the preparation of the remains for re-interment. For those reasons the Bronx Council on the Arts (BCA), specialists in handling fine art objects, was selected to prepare the remains for their final rest. BCA instituted specialized training in human anatomy and spiritual sensitivity awareness for both its staff and that of the Cobb Laboratory.

Employing strict art conservation standards, BCA devised a simple but elegant approach to the preparation in order to maintain respect and cultural sensitivity toward the remains.

Biodegradable muslin was used to wrap the remains and each was secured with muslin tape. The ancestral remains and the specific artifacts found with them were then placed in individual coffins lined with Kente cloth. BCA was committed to replicating the placement of the remains as they were found. Each member of the staff exercised great care in placing the remains with craniums facing west. A special chart was developed to mark the remains to be re-interred as closely as possible to their original positions.

RITES OF ANCESTRAL RETURN

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture created and hosted the "Rites of Ancestral Return," a week-long series of events marking the return of the human skeletal remains from Howard University in Washington, D.C., to the African Burial Ground in New York City.

The final journey for the African American Ancestors began at a ceremony at Howard University on September 30th and culminated with the reburial of the remains and their associated artifacts on October 4, 2003.

The five-day commemoration, which drew thousands, included a solemn ceremony in New York City where community members placed individual coffins bearing the Ancestral remains into seven crypts. Ministers from various congregations visited the site and offered prayers. Following the day of personal commemoration for the community, the crypts bearing the coffins were lowered into the ground at the burial site. The African American Ancestors were then memorialized in an emotional and moving ceremony of poignant eulogies, prayers, tributes, speeches, dance and sacred song.

THE FUTURE OF THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

"In all of us, there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are and where we came from…"
Alex Haley (1921-1992)

Exterior Memorial

The African Burial Ground Exterior Memorial will be constructed at the African Burial Ground site, providing a place for reflection and contemplation, and to honor those buried there. The African Burial Ground Exterior Memorial is due to be completed in September 2005. It will serve as a powerful reminder of the indomitable spirit of New York's first Africans and the contributions – until now overlooked – they made to the cultural, spiritual and economic development of this nation.

Interpretive Center

The Interpretive Center planned for the African Burial Ground will provide meaningful opportunities to educate visitors from around the world about African heritage in New York City. Multi-media exhibits and presentations designed to ensure an accurate historical framework will bring this chapter of African American history to life, helping to complete the historical record and provide a concrete link to a previously obscure past. The Interpretive Center is due to be completed in October 2005.

ARTISTIC TRIBUTES

A variety of artists have paid tribute to the African Burial Ground. Several of these artists were selected by the General Services Administration through its Art-in-Architecture program in response to recommendations by the African Burial Ground Federal Steering Committee. These works are permanently installed at the Federal office building at 290 Broadway in New York adjacent to the African Burial Ground site. Each reflects the diversity of a creative spirit and a common homage to America's African Ancestors.

A LASTING LEGACY

A tangible and enduring cultural and spiritual monument, the African Burial Ground will serve as a vital link to a history long disregarded and forgotten. It is possibly the only preserved, urban 18th century African cemetery in America and is of great significance in completing and correcting the nation's historical and cultural record. The African Burial Ground site will also contribute substantively to New York's cultural richness, adding to an array of cultural monuments celebrating the participation of immigrant communities in the history of the city. The discovery of the African Burial Ground has had and will continue to have far-reaching impact. New public recognition and interest in the role of Africans in America has led to increasing support in Congress to establish the National Museum of African American History and Culture within the Smithsonian Institution. As envisioned, the Museum would be dedicated to the collection, preservation, research and exhibition of materials that reflect the depth and breadth of the African American experience.

This history-rich discovery of the African Burial Ground in New York has given the Ancestors buried there a voice once again, allowing them to take their rightful place in history and to leave a rich legacy to those who come after them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Return to the Past to Build the Future

The U.S. General Services Administration is pleased to acknowledge the following agencies, organizations and individuals for their contributions to the African Burial Ground tribute exhibit:

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